

FINDING THE WAY: FILMS FOUND ON A SCRAP HEAP¹

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Abstract: Some filmmakers restrict their manipulations of found footage to the minimal act of presenting a film they have discovered with almost no changes. But others have subjected found footage to extensive editing, chemical manipulation, rephotography, or new soundtracks (or all of these processes combined). In this brief essay I cannot hope to cover all the permutations of this rich genre of experimental film, nor to mention all of its numerous practitioners (and I will deal with the visual image more than sound). However, I do want to give a sense of the range of approaches that exist using found footage to mention a few of its masters.

Keywords: found objects, found-footage, archival filmmaking

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Modern art made from found material often takes the form of a Dadaist joke – a work of “anti-art” that questions our assumptions about the value and nature of art generally. Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 “sculpture,” *Fountain*, a ready-made urinal placed on a pedestal for exhibition and signed “R. Mutt,” remains the most famous and powerful example of this nihilist attitude. Attacking idealizing traditions that see art as the expression of eternal beauty or individual genius, Duchamp’s work shocked viewers and raised a series of questions that became crucial to twentieth century art: the difference between industrial mass production and the traditional work of art; the very nature of authorship in the arts (“R. Mutt” referred to the name of the original manufacturer of the urinal); and the role an institution plays in defining art (is it art if a museum says it is and displays it as such?). As central as these issues are, they draw attention primarily to the discourse that surround art works. In “found art” ideas and definitions often seem more important in than creating a sensuous experience. The artwork itself appears to be secondary to its discussion.

Many found footage films have been at least partly inspired by Duchamp’s ready-mades. These films use footage that the filmmakers did not themselves shoot, and even footage that was never intended as either art or entertainment. Film critic Fred Camper referred to the seminal 1966 film, *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* by the late George Landow (also known as Owen Land) as “a Duchampian found object” (CAMPER, 2010). This six minute film loop-prints the “China Girl,” footage of a woman in a colorful blouse posed beside color bars, which Eastman Kodak places at the opening of film rolls to test color consistency. This industrial footage not only was not shot by Landow, but was intended only to be viewed by lab technicians and therefore, although attached to a film roll, was never intended to be part of a public film show. Further, Landow optically printed this original footage. Not only did he repeat the brief bit of footage numerous times, giving it a seemingly endless Sisyphean rhythm, but he revealed the entire filmstrip, including sprocket holes and edge letters, elements not visible in “proper” film projection. Finally, the title Landow gave the film directs our attention to the dirt and scratches on the film’s surface, usually considered flaws rather than an integral part of the film. All of these devices make us aware of film as a material object and an industrial product, like Duchamp’s urinal, rather than a vehicle for a story or poetic personal expression.

But does found art necessarily serve as a critical attack on art as an experience, focusing instead on concepts? Even if Landow’s film was inspired by Duchamp, my

description should indicate that, while it may partly be intended as a Dadaist joke, the film also offers a radical adjustment to how we view a film. Aspects of a movie that are usually ignored, hidden, or at least not taken seriously, were made the focus of attention. Landow's film displays a sense of humor, and even a certain defiance of its audience's expectations (according to legend, its original showings provoked protests from the audience and demands that its projection be stopped). But the film also engenders a sense of discovery. Found art involves more than simply randomly happening upon something. I will claim it seeks to trigger an experience of uncovering something new – what the surrealists call the *trouvaille*, the “lucky find.”

As the surrealists emerged from the radical nihilism of Dada in the late 1920's, they evolved a different attitude toward the modernist project of redefining the notion of art. Their attitude toward tradition remained destructive and revolutionary, but they also initiated a search for a new experience of the everyday world, seeking the marvelous in unexpected locations. Andre Breton, who defined the movement, saw found art as more than simply gleaning objects from the detritus of an industrial society. By drawing attention to the found object, he claimed, “We recognize the marvelous precipitate of desire” (BRETON, 1987: 13-14). Certain objects he came across affected him like an invasion of our ordinary waking world launched by the uncanny sensation of dreaming – as when he discovered in a Parisian flea market the equivalent of an object he had previously encountered in a dream, which he called “the Cinderella ashtray” (1987: 33). The object seemed to fuse a soup spoon and a shoe carved out of wood. It was an object that seemed neither practical, nor to represent anything, but rather realized a material metaphor, a concrete condensation of separate realities. Thus the surrealist “found object” (*objet trouvé*) questions our traditional conceptions of the way art is generated and the role of the artist, but goes beyond attacking traditional values. Found art offers less a conceptual defiance, than a new mode of experience, providing a pathway to the marvelous, where dreams and reality fuse. These oneiric works exert a fascination that exceeds traditional standards of artistic technique or production.

This *trouvaille*, the find, requires receptivity on the part of the artist and the viewer, more than technical skill or individual genius. The artist in this case does not “create” an art object; rather, she *discovers* one. Although most surrealist objects involve some manipulation of the object as well, openness to discovery constitutes the first essential gesture. The Duchampian ready-made implies a sophisticated awareness of, and even a certain ennui with, the art world. The surrealist trouvaille in contrast evokes a



child-like desire to gather magical objects, even if they appear to be mere trash to others. Instead of displaying the skill of a unique genius, the *trouvaille* defines the creative gift as deriving from the realm of chance.

The Dadaist ready-made announced the end of art. After Duchamp anything might be considered art; the whole category could be called into question. But with the *trouvaille* one could claim art comes full cycle. Instead of the end of art, the found object returns us to the very origins of the work of art. Where, in fact, does the history of the human capacity for art begin? The astonishing paintings, drawings and carvings that appear in the caves of southern Europe around 30,000 BC provide one starting point. This appearance of a new sort of human artifact, not simply a tool or practical instrument, coincides with key transformations of human evolution as our Neanderthal ancestors disappeared. But is there art before this? Paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan situated the impulse even earlier, even in Neanderthal culture. Before creating paintings or carvings our human ancestors gathered collection of unusual rocks, fossils and mineral formations that they picked up and preserved in their caves and settlements (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1993). Although we know next to nothing about the purposes, uses or meanings our ancestor gave to these “finds,” they were clearly valued and therefore collected. Thus the first gesture in human art may not be the fashioning of objects, but finding and gathering things.

Should we place a firm line between finding objects and making them? In terms of art, the two processes may be more deeply linked than our modern cult of the artist genius has allowed. Indeed it has often been remarked how the cave paintings make use of material characteristics of cave walls, their textures and bulges, as elements in the paintings that cover them. Images seem to emerge from the surfaces they are drawn on, rather than dominating them. I am claiming that an art based in found material may be not only understood as a nihilist avant-garde gesture, but as recalling the most fundamental impulses of artistic awareness: an impulse that collaborates with the world of material to make it expressive, rather than simply impressing a creative will and technical skill onto indifferent or resistant “stuff”.

Many surrealist artworks have their origin in something found which the artist then modifies and transforms to achieve its final effect. The artwork occurs as a collaboration between the maker and the original object with varying degrees of transformation. Sometimes simply the act of presentation is all that is needed to produce a work of effective art; but often the artist works over the material in the process of

realizing a potential metamorphosis. Thus found art, and especially found footage films, exists within a gamut of techniques, purposes and degrees of intervention. But in all cases (such as Picasso's rearrangement of the seat and handlebars of a bicycle to create an object that looks like a bull's head with horns) the original object/material remains evident through any transformation. This sense of the original object is essential to the form.

A film that is often cited as one of the earliest found footage films, Joseph Cornell's 1936 film *Rose Hobart*, exemplifies the surrealist *trouvaille* revealed beneath the surface of a found commercial film by a canny series of eliminations and additions. Stripping a 30's melodrama of its soundtrack, culling scenes from it in a manner that did away with any semblance of narrative order (and adding few shots from unrelated scientific films), Cornell made a compilation of heightened moments of erotic mystery and enigma, focused on his obsession with the film's star Rose Hobart. Literalizing Breton's understanding of the *trouvaille* as the "marvelous precipitate of desire", Cornell delivered Hobart's image from its enthrallment to a stereotypical plot and created a dream-like homage (a bit like Lewis Klahr's tribute to Mimsy Farmer in his 1987 found footage film *Her Fragrant Emulsion*) to a little-known enigmatic actress. Cornell not only eliminated the narrative logic and dialogue of the original film, but by projecting it at silent speed through a blue piece of glass and accompanying it with recordings of exotically themed pop jazz, he transformed a clichéd film into a more mysterious scenography of desire.

Some filmmakers restrict their manipulations of found footage to the minimal act of presenting a film they have discovered with almost no changes. But others have subjected found footage to extensive editing, chemical manipulation, rephotography, or new soundtracks (or all of these processes combined). In this brief essay I cannot hope to cover all the permutations of this rich genre of experimental film, nor to mention all of its numerous practitioners (and I will deal with the visual image more than sound). However, I do want to give a sense of the range of approaches that exist using found footage to mention a few of its masters.

At one extreme lies Ken Jacobs's 1985 film *Perfect Film*, which rescued discarded television news footage surrounding the assassination of Malcolm X that Jacobs had discovered in a New York junk shop. Jacobs presented the footage very much as he found it, but his act of retrieval has not only aesthetic, but also political, implications. Likewise the title he gave his film, indicates one extreme of the found film aesthetic, in effect claiming: "This film, as it is, is perfect. I not only discovered it, but I recognize and proclaim

its perfection.” On the one hand, Jacobs bows out of the picture, so that the film itself, bearing its contingent and fragmentary record of history, and the entirely accidental nature of its discovery are highlighted. However, by pointing out the footage to us, finding, preserving and presenting it, he brings it back into the world, like a midwife performing a difficult delivery.

Similarly, Ernie Gehr’s 1974 film *Eureka* rediscovered a 1906 Mills brothers’ film shot from a vehicle moving down San Francisco’s Market Street just days before the great earthquake. Gehr presents nearly all the original footage of this amazing continuous tracking shot down the street (he does cut the last moments of the original film and thereby creates an ending in which the deep recessive space of the ride down Market Street ends in a much more compressed and shallow space). The original film lasted only some six minutes, while Gehr’s film lasts about 38 minutes. Gehr re-photographed the original footage, in the process stretch-printing it, repeating each frame some 8 times. This uncanny extension gives the film a strange cadence, as if its images, more than a century old, were struggling from afar to reach our contemporary eyes. This dilation of time and space also intensifies our scrutiny of the footage, so that each action can be examined minutely, like the pensive viewer Laura Mulvey finds new digital viewings of films make possible (MULVEY, 2006). Working with found footage does not forbid its manipulation, although Gehr accomplishes his manipulation in a way that, if anything, directs our attention to the original in a more focused manner. Gehr has stressed his desire to give access to the film, rather than to transform it:

I hope that this simple muted process allowed enough room for me to make the original work "available" without getting too much in the way. This was very important to me as I tend to see what I did, in part, as the work of an archaeologist, resurrecting an old film as well as the shadows and forces of another era.²

As with *Perfect Film* or *Film in which...*, Gehr’s title also guides the viewer on the pathway of discovery. *Eureka* is Greek for “I have found it”, the legendary exclamation uttered by the ancient scientist Archimedes as he sprang from his bath, after having discovered the solution to a vexing problem. Near the end of Gehr’s film a wagon bearing the inscription “Eureka, California” passes through the frame, although the viewer must be paying attention to catch it. The viewer’s act of discovery of a new significance in an aleatory

² Gehr quoted in San Francisco Cinematheque Program Notes.

happening reflects Gehr's own process of discovery of the details of quotidian history as he refashioned the original film.

Filmmakers started recycling film footage near the beginning of film history. Early films by the Edison Company or Pathé Frères reused shots from previously released films, and Hollywood studios maintained stock footage libraries throughout the classical era (Hollywood B-films exist which cut in brief footage actually shot by Sergei Eisenstein or Fritz Lang without acknowledgement). As fascinating as these recycling processes are, I find them quite different from the found footage films I have been describing, which, far from seeking to remain unnoticed, highlight their appropriation of other films. However, in contrast to Gehr and Jacobs who hope to preserve a strong sense of the original footage, some found footage filmmakers seek to radically redefine the footage they appropriate, giving it new meanings.

Indeed the theory and practice of montage, especially as developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920's, sought to demonstrate the power of editing over shooting, the ability of juxtaposition to endow shots with meanings, sometimes antithetical to their original intentions. As I have claimed elsewhere, the famous Mozhukin experiment which Lev Kuleshov carried out with his students in the USSR in the early twenties to prove editing's control over significance, could be considered a found footage film (GUNNING, 2009). Kuleshov took a pre-existing close-up of the Russian movie star (and émigré) Mozhukin and cut this same shot with a variety of other shots: a dead baby, a bowl of soup and a naked woman. Through this juxtaposition, each edited fragment took on a different meaning: sorrow, hunger or lust.

Eisenstein learned to edit under Kuleshov and the documentary filmmaker Esfir Shub, who, like many documentary filmmakers, worked with archival footage she had not shot. Although this documentary practice of archival filmmaking relates to found footage filmmaking, its method of culling footage with specific references (such as Shub's careful collection of film images preceding the October Revolution for her 1927 compilation film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*) differs quite a bit from the surrealist redefinition of the meaning of footage (or objects). More than assembling footage around a specific theme, found footage films as I am defining them seek to evoke unexpected associations.

But certainly the shared use of pre-existing material remains an important connection between compilation documentaries and found footage films, especially when the meanings of the original footage are transformed, as Shub's pointedly critical editing does. Once again we see how found footage, while remaining a unique form of making

films, nonetheless bears a strong relation to the fundamental structures of editing and of documentary filmmaking. The documentary compilation film certainly shades into the genre of found footage as I have been describing it, and a whole school of films using documentary footage organized around specific themes has evolved, especially in the extraordinary work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi or films such as Vincent Monnikendam's 1995 film of footage from colonial Dutch Indies *Mother Dao the Turtle-like*, which deserve a complete study on their own. While I feel they have a somewhat different history and practice than the more directly surrealist-inspired films I have been describing here, their beauty and complexity often strongly intersects with the tradition I am tracing.

At antipodes to the desire to make only minimal transformation that we found in Gehr and Jacobs (who believed redirecting the viewer's attention will reveal latent aspects of the original footage), many found footage filmmakers use radical juxtapositions in order to radically redefine the images they show (not unlike Man Ray's addition of sharp nails to the bottom of a flat iron in his 1921 found object entitled *Cadeau*, "Gift.") Bruce Connors' extraordinary montage films of found footage, such as *A Movie* (1958), *Cosmic Ray* (1960), *Report* (1967), *Mongoloid* (1978), *Valse Triste* (1978) edited together footage from advertisements, educational films, documentaries, pornography and musical numbers to create mysterious and often hilarious (and not infrequently terrifying) films, which seem to expose the collective unconscious of a moving image culture that has overwhelmed us since at least the dawn of television. Many extraordinary filmmakers have mined an archive out-of-control not only to evoke dream-like juxtapositions, but to express political and social commentary. Such works range from the kinetic films of Abigail Child (which often make use of footage she does shoot), which seem to navigate the viewer from a hellish vision of oppressive mass-produced fantasies to moments of grace and beauty found within the refuse heaps of history. Or Craig Baldwin's paranoid parodies of conspiracy documentaries, which derive an odd creditability through their appropriation of the very images that surround and seduce us. A group of Viennese filmmakers – Martin Arnold, Peter Tscherkassky and Gustav Deutsch – represent perhaps the most radically transforming of found footage filmmakers, as they employ complex repetitive patterns of printing or, more recently, digital manipulations (as in Arnold's work); literally collage and superimpose the film material itself (as Tscherkassky does); or carefully forage through archives of cinema (especially the neglected realms of informational films or early cinema) in order to create a distillation of the very nature of cinema (as in Deutsch's series *Film*



ist). Tscherkassky's 1998 film *L'Arrivée* shows how varied the use of found footage can be. This brief gem-like film borrows from a commercial high budget, wide-screen film an arc of romantic and emotional, even if stereotypical, action: a train arrives at a station; lovers meet, and embrace. But this dramatically intense action competes for our attention with a sort of invasion of elements from beyond the margins of the film: the usually invisible sound track, film edges and sprocket holes. While this may (perhaps even intentionally) recall Landow's earlier film, the effect could not be more different. Landow's expansion of the film frame pulls us away from conventional modes of film watching and develops a calm, almost meditative, rhythm of repetition, (marked especially by the reappearing blink of the China Girl). The image Landow constructs remains stable, cyclical and the footage he used contains no narrative. Tscherkassky, on the other hand, seems to orchestrate a titanic struggle between the predictable forces of emotion contained by a familiar narrative sequence and the irrepressible chaos of the materiality of the filmstrip. The sprocket holes and soundtrack overwhelm the representational image, like primal furies engaged in a *sparagmos* of the conventional image, as if enacting a sacrificial violence. Thus formal operations do not transform the original footage so much as obliterate it. Yet, the original footage also persists on screen in its unreeling logic, seeming unstoppable in its narrative resolution, even when faced by the firestorm of outraged off screen elements. Tscherkassky's recent, most beautiful, film *Coming Attractions* (2010) creates a complex mosaic of cross-references – both formal, between shots, and historical, between periods and genres. This film demonstrates the extreme textual density found footage can achieve, interweaving early cinema, the avant-garde and commercial advertising. *Coming Attractions* employs multiple techniques as it transforms its found footage. It reworks the material surface of its footage, displaying both scratches accumulated through wear and tear, and Tscherkassky's deliberate collaging; it plays with the syntax of gesture, movement and glance in its editing; and, again recalling Landow, it especially explores the role of repetition in film, both through multiple-printing, but also in capturing the demands that actors endlessly repeat a gesture or expression in order to get what a director wants from them; and finally it explores the solicitation of the viewer's attention and desire implied by the term "attraction" through the coy glance and the revealing display. In the Kuleshov tradition, Tscherkassky absolutely creates a new film from his found footage, but still he delivers to us discoveries drawn from the original footage, revelations about the nature of the film image and our fascination with it.



Jean Epstein and other avant-garde theorists and practitioners of the twenties claimed that the cinema was the medium best suited for capturing the material dramas of the world. Cinema often stars matter in motion rather than people, from scientific microscopic films of cellular activity or crystal-growing, to time-lapse movies of the growth of plants, or shots of the natural elements in action (whether ocean surf, the patterns of flame, or the famous wind blowing in the leaves). But as Tscherkassky's films show, celluloid material itself can also provide the occasion of discovery and transformation. While some of Peter Delpet's found footage films, focus on redefining the images and action of film documents (most extremely in *The Forbidden Quest* (1992), which fashions a science fiction narrative, based on fiction by Poe and Verne, out of actual records of Arctic and Antarctic voyages of exploration), his *Lyrical Nitrate* (1990) focused on film's chemical decomposition, using films from the era of nitrate stock which undergoes a especially dramatic deterioration. Bill Morrison's films, such as *Decasia* (2002), have also explored this chemical death of cinema. In these films the transformation of the image is not in the control of the filmmaker, who has simply selected examples of a process of decomposition from archival films. Yet this dramatic process of change remains entrancing, even as one mourns the loss of bits of film history. Archivist and theoretician, Paolo Cherchi Usai, has written insightfully about cinema's inevitable decay as an essential part of its nature, and in his film *Passio* (2007) (which unfortunately I have never seen, given the limited screenings it has received), created a cinematic meditation on this process, using found footage (CHERCHI USAI, 2008). In observing the decay of their medium, these artists push the realm of discovery to the point of dissolution. The role of found footage filmmaker as midwife here reaches an astonishing conclusion: the filmmaker becomes undertaker, but an undertaker, who rather than burying the body of evidence, resurrects it, brings it literally to light, but still bearing its evidence of death and decay.

To my mind one of the most powerful contemporary filmmakers dealing with found footage has collaborated with the material transformation of the cinematic image in a truly unique manner, blending control and discovery, obscurity and recognition. Phil Solomon's films employ a range of methods and even genres, but reworking pre-existed footage – whether films famous in the history of cinema, home movies, television documentaries, or even video games – has provided a recurrent baseline to his work. Recently, his films seem to me to provide an extended meditation on the chemical nature of cinema, the basic reliance of filmmaking on the sensitive chemicals contained in the



emulsion of the filmstrip, which, when exposed to light, are first changed by that contact, and then, in the process of developing and printing, are changed again. Usually these processes are in thrall to the production of a recognizable image: indeed many theorists claim photography and film faithfully capture the imprint of the world in the form of an image. Solomon acknowledges that aspect of film, its preservation of the things we see, but he reveals how this process also transforms things fundamentally.

In Solomon's work this complex process of cinema chemistry can be refashioned, diverted from the simply familiar into new terrains. It is as though the apparatuses of cinema – camera, developing and printing – all take on a creative role rather than simply serving a process of reproduction. More than the fidelity of photography, Solomon practices its alchemy, its ability to change base mater into Breton's precipitate of desire. He subjects his found images to all the trials film can endure, treating the film with chemicals, using heat and other process, which, like all great alchemists, he keeps secret. But the results are evident. At points resembling the distorted and decaying images of aged nitrate, Solomon's films twist and dissolve before us, undergoing a sea change as they slip in and out of recognizable imagery. In presenting the cinematic metamorphosis of matter, his images recall the rough handling of pigment by Abstract Expressionist painters, or the treatment of surfaces with pumice, running water or exposure to a hot oven explored by the great American painter of the late nineteenth century Ralph Blakelock.

Although Solomon seems to subject cinema to a passion worthy of Golgotha, like all the filmmakers I have touched on in this survey, his techniques of destruction ultimately become means of discovery. The use of found footage redefines the process of creation, dethroning the all-mighty creator in favor of the artist as collaborator with both her media and her material. These filmmakers do not resemble the God of the *Old Testament* who creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Rather they recall the passage in Psalm 118, so important to the alchemists, which claims, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." In a world of throw-away images and media, these artists teach us to see again what has been ignored and to practice a process of discovery that we might properly call: art.

Is found footage an elegiac form? As so many of these works stress the age and vulnerability of the material they work with, a sense of the past seems pervasive. Likewise using processes of destruction as tools of transformation – the vision of film decaying, tearing, being scratched and spliced – remain a keynote for this form of filmmaking.

Further we might ask if, as celluloid (or rather acetate!) becomes replaced by digital processes, is the found footage film's obsession with cinema's material and chemistry simply nostalgia? Although the process of mourning seems to me essential to an experience of these films, I have tried to indicate as well their sense of renewal and rediscovery. Digital processes provide new modes of transformation and preservation and new processes even of decay. A whole other essay could be written on the digital forms of found footage currently emerging. Perhaps most importantly, digital formats place vast archives of material within reach of artists and viewers. I cannot see found footage simply as marking the end of cinema, even if it accomplishes that role beautifully. Rather, it seems to me a form deeply embedded in our historicity: fashioning a dialectical sense of our past as a process constantly available to the revisions of the future.

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